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ABSTRACT

Access courses have been designed to facilitate entry to higher education, either universities or polytechnical institutions, for nontraditional students. Basic characteristics of access courses include clear entry criteria that target nontraditional students; no insistence on formal educational requirements; recognition of prior, experiential learning; a needs-based, negotiated curriculum; validation by specific higher education institutions; guaranteed progression to specified higher education courses; and higher education staff involvement in organizing and teaching access courses. Some courses are restricted to one category of student (such as women or ethnic minorities), whereas others offer entry to several categories of nontraditional student. In 1978 a selected number of local education authorities (LEAs) in Great Britain were invited to give increased priority to access. Provision of access to higher education is, however, still patchy. Educationally and economically disadvantaged students still do not receive even discretionary grants, and provision of access to further education courses, which tend to lead to employment, is still in the experimental stage. Organizational issues that LEAs, colleges, and higher education institutions need to consider include development of an LEA policy on access, with supporting resources; development of mechanisms for effective consultation and progression between further and higher education; and provision of adequate resources to allow adult learners to pursue flexible courses of study. (A list of Further Education Unit publications and projects relevant to the access issue is appended.) (MN)

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Access to Further and Higher Education

A Discussion Document

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Dear Sir/Madam

ACCESS TO FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

I enclose a copy of a discussion document which summarises current FEU thinking on Access to FHE. It explores some of the key issues for Access courses in the current situation.

The FEU Board of Management are among those who consistently argue that there is a considerable pool of talent which goes largely unrecognised by the formal education system. A range of Access courses has been launched over the past few years primarily aimed at facilitating entry to higher education for these non-traditional students. Those who face particular difficulties, however, include aspiring students from the working class, women and ethnic minority (especially black) communities.

The characteristic features of Access courses include supportive entry criteria, appropriate targeting, close relationships with sympathetic HE institutions and guaranteed progression on to specified HE courses. Such courses have been successful in promoting entry for these students and the evidence indicates that Access students perform in HE at least as well as standard-entry students. Access courses are therefore beginning to tap the reserves of talent we have available. Much however remains to be done. Few Access students receive grants, and course provision is patchy. Also, the issue of Access to FE courses has received less attention; specific courses are rare although statistically their potential must be significant.

In curriculum terms, Access provision is student-centred, takes full account of student prior experience and provides specialist support where required. There is little evidence as yet that the HE curriculum provision is being influenced by these developments and Access courses are generally assumed to prepare 'non-traditional students for traditional provision'. Sections III, IV and V of the document question the validity of this assumption, look at a range of problems and suggest a number of ways in which these issues can be tackled by institutions on both sides of the FE/HE line.

In a period of rapid change in education and society the experience of adult students from non-traditional backgrounds who have experienced change and its consequences (including unemployment) can provide a valuable resource to the education system as well as benefit from it. There are therefore opportunities here for LEAs, colleges and higher education institutions to develop more efficient, as well as more socially responsive, use of our educational resources. It is hoped that this document and its dissemination will assist in this development.

Yours faithfully,

Jack Mansell

JACK MANSELL
Chief Officer

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Access courses are designed to facilitate entry to higher education for non-traditional students. Many are located in FE colleges, but they also exist in adult or community education centres and the new open colleges. Normally one-year full-time courses, they are sometimes preceded by *Pre-Access* or *Return to Learning* courses. Part-time (including 21-hour), as well as full-time, courses are available, and may extend for more than one year.

2. Basic characteristics of Access courses are negotiated and guaranteed progression procedures on to specified courses at particular HE institutions, validation of courses by those HE institutions, and HE staff involvement in the teaching of Access courses. Some courses offer access to a (limited) range of courses, but most are tied to one course at one institution. Some Access courses offer access to universities, but most to polytechnics.

3. Entry criteria to Access courses vary. Some are restricted to one category of student, such as women or ethnic minorities, and others offer entry to several categories of non-traditional student.

4. A DES initiative in 1978 invited a selected number of LEAs to give increased priority to Access, and after a slow start significant progress has since been made. Access courses are now an accepted part of the FE scene, but nationally their status remains 'experimental'. Their provision is heavily reliant on local and individual initiative. Policy formulation remains patchy, issues undefined and future development uncertain.

5. This paper attempts to clarify some of the issues, describes some of the support that has been developed and suggests an agenda for action.

II. STUDENTS

6. There appears to be no lack of agreement that with respect to both education and training we do not optimise the skills and talents of our population. Indeed, with a multicultural population it could be argued that we now have less appreciation of the talent available. We have a clear but dominant route of progression to degree courses that is heavily reliant on GCSE and 'A' level examinations. But this route applies to only a minority of our population. All other routes are complex, often time wasting and invariably of lower status.

7. FEU has consistently maintained that there is a considerable pool of talent which is insufficiently recognised by the formal education system. Much of the effort put into the design of pre-vocational schemes has been to enable such talent to be recognised and developed at post-16 level. Work by MSC, FEU and others on adult education and training is beginning to emphasise the special qualities and skills - based on their experience of life and work - which adults, including the unemployed, can bring to the learning environment[1].

8. In vocational education and training (VET), the new National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) has been charged with the task of reducing confusion in this area, but even here the lack of progression between vocational qualifications and 'academic' higher education[2] is likely to persist.

9. The net result is that we have large numbers of 'non-traditional' students seeking to attain HE qualifications. Non-traditional students, in the broadest sense, can include all those who do not follow the traditional route to university through the acquisition, in a sixth form, of the required number of 'A' levels at the age of 18.

10. Access courses are often designed to reach those groups who have been least well-served by the school system and who face particular barriers to entry to higher education. These include ethnic minorities, especially the black communities; women, especially those who, through early parenthood or the need to work, had to abandon their education; and working class adults, especially the unemployed, whose talents may not have been fully recognised at the secondary stage.

11. Many such students have no formal qualifications, but may demonstrate considerable 'ability to benefit' (the 1984 UGC/NAB reformulation of the Robbins principle)[3] from HE through a combination of experience, written evidence and motivation. In an FE context, recent evidence from HMI and others has indicated that barriers to access are also operating against the same groups of students, especially in certain higher status vocational courses often leading directly to employment or to advanced further education.

III. ROUTES

Access to HE

12. FE colleges and adult education centres for a long time provided the only route by which mature students could gain access to higher education, by means of what has been described as 'five years hard labour' through evening classes to gain the required number of 'O' levels and 'A' levels. No special facilities[4] were made available for such students, many dropped out and exceptional motivation, resilience and determination were required in order to succeed.

13. However, it is not with this conventional alternative route that Access, as currently understood, is concerned. Today's approach to Access places a responsibility on institutions to identify the barriers which are placed in the way of non-traditional learners, to acknowledge that previous learning environments may have contributed to many adults feeling dissatisfied with their education - and to create conditions which support non-traditional learners, enabling them to develop to their maximum potential. The initial DES invitation to LEAs to set up Access courses referred to the need to ensure that all members of the community have equal opportunities in relation to HE. Recent surveys of Access provision[5], notably the DES-funded Millins report on Access Studies, indicate that the demand for higher education among non-traditional students is considerable. Additional evidence, from a CNAA study[6] on performance of a cohort of students at final degree level, shows that non-traditional students perform significantly better than their traditional-entry counterparts.

14. Earlier initiatives, such as the Open University, the Dip HE and CNAA flexible entry policy, have not totally succeeded in their declared aim of increasing the proportion of non-traditional students entering higher education. The current *Access* initiative, with entry criteria positively targeted on such groups of students, is proving more successful in attracting and retaining this clientele.

Access to FE

15. Many 'mainstream' vocational courses in further education were developed as a response to part-time students, on release from their employers. Entry to these courses which, mainly through the apprenticeship system, offer access direct to employment or to higher level training is still almost entirely controlled by employers. Many entrants are selected on the basis of close family and local connections with the trade or craft they wish to follow with specific employers. The system has therefore not favoured non-traditional groups, especially those from the black communities and young women who wish to enter traditionally 'male' occupations.

16. With the advent of large-scale youth unemployment and the drastic fall in apprenticeships in the late '70s and '80s, full-time vocational courses have been

developed in several curriculum areas, such as new technology, catering and business studies. This trend is likely to continue, especially with the availability of a two-year YTS. But the evidence from HMI surveys, and from evaluation of Mode A YTS, is that non-traditional groups continue to be disfavoured; and for them progression from full-time courses into employment or higher level courses is far from assured.

17. In response to this, some FE colleges are providing specialised preparatory or bridging courses with built-in support, for example, for girls in science/technology courses, or English language support and mother-tongue counselling for bilingual students. The CPVE framework has been used successfully to accommodate similar aims. One or two colleges have introduced a specific *Access* approach to such courses, with specified entry criteria and guaranteed progression, on successful completion of the course, to higher level courses.

IV. ISSUES

Policy and resources

18. The DES Access initiative of 1978, mentioned in paragraph 4 above, did not offer additional resources, nor were Access students eligible for mandatory awards. Participating LEAs were simply invited to reassess their own policy priorities for local authority FHE and to provide the required resources. In the event, the invitation coincided fully with policy priorities in only two of the LEAs concerned[1]. These went ahead with the creation of new Access courses (or, in one ILEA college, the expansion of existing courses) and provided automatic discretionary grants for students selected.

19. Access courses are not cheap; they demand adequate staffing levels and require regular counselling, guidance and opportunities for self-paced and small-group work. It follows that Access provision is best developed as part of an overall policy towards non-traditional students; and that policy has to recognise that Access courses require reallocation of resources at college and LEA levels. Many Access students have family responsibilities, sometimes as single parents, and are on low incomes or are unemployed. Flexibility in timetables and study facilities are important for such students, and facilities and possibilities for evening attendance have been identified as particularly important.

Link with HE institutions

20. The DES-funded Millins report (1984) identified the establishment of close and effective links with HE institutions as being a key factor in the success of an Access course. If those who have least benefited from the education system and have least earning power are to be attracted to Access courses, they need assurance that the offer of Access is genuine. At the same time HE institutions need to be assured that an Access course is an effective preparation for a degree course. The tried and tested method is the validation of the course by the HE institution(s) concerned, with a guaranteed place on successful completion of the Access course. Where two or more institutions or departments are concerned, LEA involvement in negotiations has proved useful.

Entry criteria and community consultation

21. Those groups who have least benefited from the education system tend to regard it, not unnaturally, with suspicion. It is therefore essential that criteria for entry to Access courses, and the rationale which underlies them, are made explicit and widely publicised. Strong arguments are advanced both for courses targeted at very specific groups (e.g. a current course for Bangladeshis in East London) and for courses for several categories of non-traditional learners. But if suspicions are to be allayed and confidence built up, these arguments need to be explored locally with a range of interested groups, and the agreed provision

disseminated widely, using whatever channels are most effective in reaching the groups concerned.

22. The local community also needs assurance that the Access course is genuinely bringing benefits to it. An FEU project (RP75)[8] pointed to some of the problems which can arise if local (in this case, black) communities are not consulted over an Access course which is ostensibly designed for their benefit. Similar problems have arisen where the management of a course for women is largely in the hands of men. A management committee for the course, including representation from FE and HE, teachers, students and community groups, provides a vehicle in which the necessary confidence and trust can develop.

Curriculum issues

23. Access courses derive from origins which go much further back than the 1978 DES initiative. A number of FE colleges and a much larger number of adult education centres, LEA classes, university extra-mural classes, and black community and women's self-organised classes have acted as preparation grounds and support groups for non-traditional learners trying to break into higher education. The Access curriculum therefore derives at least in part from student-centred, negotiated approaches characteristic of much adult and further education. Unless an Access curriculum is carefully planned and negotiated, retaining sufficient flexibility to be renegotiated as students develop their own identities as learners, or as new and different groups of students enrol, the strains of competing perspectives can lead to conflict. Key issues for curriculum planners, and for consultation and negotiation, are discussed briefly below.

A balanced curriculum

24. An appropriate balance must exist between learner-centred approaches, which value and build on the experience of adult students, and subject-centred approaches, which prepare the students for the demands which will be made on them. What is clear from FEU experience is that a course which leans too far in one direction or the other will meet resistance. Non-traditional learners are less tolerant (and are more prepared to voice their intolerance) than 18-year-olds of a curriculum which appears remote from live experience and which adopts teaching approaches that appear to ignore or patronise their experience.

A skills-based curriculum

25. Access courses concentrate on developing the skills students need to perform effectively at degree level, rather than on conventional accumulated knowledge. This must obviously relate to the demands of the subject but two crucial areas for those whose learning has been acquired through experience rather than schooling are the ability to write discursive prose and the ability to work with mathematical concepts. Methods have been adopted which facilitate the development of these skills without demotivating the student, but the Millins

report found the mathematics component the most difficult area of the Access curriculum. An FEU project (RP337) evaluating the curriculum of science and technology Access courses is giving special attention to mathematics and to the balance between skills and the knowledge components associated with these subjects.

Flexible delivery

26. Even a curriculum and timetable initially negotiated with the group may quickly become too rigid for some students. The range of previous student experience, the amount of formal learning undertaken and the lapse of time since it was completed require tutors to allow for self-paced and small-group learning. Some students may have the confidence to make rapid progress, others may require particular support in language, written expression, mathematics or study skills. The role of the tutor, as in much FE teaching, is to act as a resource: to facilitate access to other resources and to be available as a support to individuals or groups of learners, as well as to provide information when appropriate. An adequate guidance/counselling element within the course will enable difficulties and differences to be raised in a supportive environment.

Transition to HE

27. The move from the supportive atmosphere of an Access course, in a familiar locality, to a large HE institution in a less familiar area raises issues of social, as well as academic, distance. Attending a course among confident, middle-class students, recently from school, can be a disorientating experience for an adult from a quite different background. HE departments need to ensure that there are opportunities for such students to meet to provide mutual support and that Access students are not isolated or treated with suspicion.[9]

28. The extra-critical edge provided by greater experience in the 'real world' may make such students question their early experience in HE. Individual or group tutorials should bring such questions into the open. Involving Access tutors in such discussions, either in the HE institution or on the 'safer' ground of the Access base, is a well-tried method of easing transition. A recent study of former Access students[10] reports widespread concern at the lack of an effective tutorial system and records how one group of students set up a self-help group to combat a perceived lack of interest in their problems as learners. The need for counselling and guidance is more acute in large and unfamiliar institutions. Closer relationships between receiving and 'feeder' institutions and greater understanding of non-traditional learners are required if wastage is to be eliminated.

A responsive curriculum

29. Other criticisms from Access students focus on the nature of the curriculum in those HE departments which have a strong internal tradition of scholarship

which appears to place no premium on relevance to a changing world outside the institution. There are echoes here of the concern of the Green Paper *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (Cmnd 9524, HMSO, 1985) for relevance in higher education; and of the CNAA's desire[11] for freer movement between higher education, work experience and technical or vocational education. If higher education is moving towards a greater responsiveness to the needs of industry and society, then it must be responsive to those students who have acquired much of their learning outside the education system. Given the opportunity, such students can contribute much to the reviewing, updating and responsiveness of an HE curriculum.[12]

V. SUPPORT

Staff development for FE

30. Many of the curriculum issues raised above will be familiar, although in different contexts, to FE teachers with backgrounds in vocational preparation and adult education and training. Teachers with specialist backgrounds in more traditional and exam-orientated contexts may find difficulties in adapting to the Access environment. ILEA, for example, has recommended[13] staff development courses covering many of the organisational and curriculum issues highlighted above for all tutors new to Access courses. Less formal methods, utilising regular team meetings of Access course staff (including those who teach part-time) have also been found essential. Problems and issues can thus be identified early and explored in the group or with help from outside.

Staff development for HE

31. HE staff involved in an Access course evaluated as part of FEU project RP75 found the experience of contributing to the course a staff development exercise in itself. In particular, the staff team meetings which attempted to integrate the different elements of the course into a planned curriculum were useful, though time consuming.

32. Non-traditional students are likely to constitute an increasing proportion of the HE student body, in the face of declining numbers of 18-year-olds. Many of the issues raised earlier suggest changes in teaching methods and approaches. Thus staff development programmes should have regard to the particular needs of these students. They should explore student-centred methods, experience-based learning/ assessment, and group work. There may be a need to review the effectiveness of those methods in some departments which rely heavily on lectures, demonstrations, seminars and a weekly piece of work from the student, if courses are fully to meet the needs of students as well as subject.

VI. FUTURE ACTION

33. FEU has already commissioned work in the field of Access to HE. Current projects and relevant publications are listed in appendix 2. CNAA is also undertaking a development programme on Access, and there is liaison between FEU and CNNA to ensure complementarity.

34. The issue of Access to FE has, however, as yet been barely addressed, and FEU hopes to commission a survey in 1987. Some of the issues raised in this paper are beyond the scope of FEU action. A survey commissioned on grant-aid to students[14] gave a disturbing picture of inconsistent and often minimal financial support from LEAs for these students. Given the restrictions on local authority spending this is not perhaps surprising, but CNAA has recently called for grants to students on full-time Access courses to be mandatory, and the FEU Board of Management would support this plea.

35. The original DES Access initiative goes back nearly a decade, and yet response from LEAs has been primarily from a few large urban authorities. Even within these authorities, the main response has been from public sector higher education, and from certain polytechnic faculties, notably social services, teacher education and humanities. A clear response to the Millins report and an indication of support and guidance from the centre would encourage many LEAs and institutions, including universities, to develop Access courses. The universities are at the moment very much underrepresented as receivers of Access students: a response from universities, as part of a more general response from higher education to the contribution made possible by non-traditional students, would be of benefit to all partners in the Access initiative.

VII. SUMMARY

36. Access courses, as defined in this paper, are designed to facilitate entry to higher education for non-traditional students: i.e. those students from groups, such as working class students, women and ethnic minority (especially black) communities, which face particular barriers to entry to FE and HE.

37. Basic characteristics of Access courses include:

- clear entry criteria, targeting non-traditional students;
- no insistence on formal educational qualifications;
- recognition of prior learning through experience;
- a needs-based, negotiated curriculum;
- validation by specified HE institutions;
- guaranteed progression on to specified HE courses;
- HE staff involvement in organisation and teaching of Access courses.

38. Provision of Access to HE is still patchy, and students disadvantaged by background and income do not receive even discretionary grants. However, Access student performance at degree level is impressive.

39. Provision of Access to FE courses, especially to the higher status vocational courses which tend to lead to employment, is still at the experimental stage.

40. Organisational issues which LEAs, colleges and HE institutions may need to consider include:

- an LEA policy on Access, with supporting resources including grants;
- mechanisms for effective consultation and progression between FE and HE;
- adequate resources for flexible study for adult learners.

41. Curriculum issues which FE and HE institutions may need to consider include:

- facilities for guidance and counselling;
- negotiated curriculum balance between
  - learner-centred methods
  - the demands of the subject
  - the experience of the student;
- availability of support in language, mathematics, study skills etc.;
- curriculum design which is based on delivering the *skills* required for success at degree level;
- specialised staff development for both FE and HE staff.

42. The 'experimental' period of Access courses has lasted nearly a decade. Access courses are surely now a tried and tested part of FHE curricular provision. They should be adopted in all LEAs and HE establishments and be given clear guidance and support from the centre.

APPENDIX 1: NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *A Larger Perspective Required: FEU Statement on the Provision of Education and Training for Adults* (FEU, 1984) *Curriculum Development in the Education of Adults* (FEU, 1984) *Adult Unemployment and the Curriculum* (FEU, 1985)

2. *Moving Up* (FEU, 1985)

3. See also: *A Strategy for Higher Education into the 1990s and Beyond* (NAB, 1984) which stresses higher education's indifferent record in accepting working class students, women and the ethnic minorities.

4. *Curriculum Opportunity* (FEU, 1983), a report of a study by Norman Evans of the extent to which HE and FE institutions recognise experiential and uncertificated learning as relevant to entry requirements. See also N Evans, *Post-Education Society: Recognising Adults as Learners* (Croom Helm, 1985)

5. *Access Studies to Higher Education* K Millins (Roehampton Institute of Higher Education, 1984) and *A Survey of Access Courses in England* S Lucas and P Ward (Lancaster University, 1985). The latter identifies 130 Access courses in operation in the academic year 1984-5.

6. Part of a long-term study of CNAA graduates by J Brennan (1984) showed that 42% of non-standard entry students, as against 31% of 18+ 'A' level students, gained 2:1 or 1st class degrees. An article on the study appeared in the *Journal of Access Studies* Vol.1, No.2.

7. referred to in note 4 above.

8. RP75 *Evaluation of Post Experience Courses*. Report available from FEU Information Centre

9. The Lindop Report *Academic Validation in Public Sector Higher Education: The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Academic Validation of Degree Courses in the Public Sector of Higher Education* (Cmnd 9501) (HMSO, 1985) appeared to give credence to the need for HE institutions to take special care over the 'quality' of Access students. *FEU Response to Academic Validation of Degree Courses for Higher Education (The Lindop Report)* (FEU, 1985) commented on the issues raised.

10. S. Weil 'Non traditional learners within traditional higher education institutions: discovery and disappointment' *Studies in Higher Education* Vol.11, No.3 (1986)

11. 'CNAA's Access Policy: recent developments' M Farthing, *Journal of Access Studies* Vol.l, No.1 (April 1986)

12. See G. Parry 'From Patronage to Partnership' *Journal of Access Studies* Vol 1, No.1 (April 1986)

13. *Access to Higher Education: Report of Review of Courses by the Inspectorate* (ILEA, 1984)

14. *A Survey of LEA Funding Policies for Access Studies* J Yates and P Davies (Centre for Access Studies, 1985)

APPENDIX 2: FEU PUBLICATIONS AND PROJECTS RELEVANT TO ACCESS

Publications

Flexible Learning Opportunities 1983

Curriculum Opportunity (A map of experiential learning in entry requirements to further and higher education award bearing courses) 1983

Curriculum Development in the Education of Adults (A manual for practitioners) 1984

FEU Response to Academic Validation of Degree Courses for Higher Education (The Lindop Report) 1985

Changing the Focus: Women and FE 1985

Moving Up (An overview of transition between vocational further and higher education) 1985

Curriculum Development for a Multicultural Society: Policy and Curriculum 1985

Black Perspectives on FE Provision 1985

Extending the Curriculum (A handbook for introducing an integrated approach to study skills) Longman for FEU, 1986

Adult Unemployment and the Curriculum (A manual for practitioners) 1985

Projects

RP75 *Evaluation of Post Experience Courses* (report not published but available on request from FEU Information Office)

RP198 *Developing Communication Skills for a Multicultural Society* (in press)

RP231 *Assessment of Experiential Learning* (report to be published by Longman for FEU as *Assessing Experiential Learning*, 1987)

RP232 *Working with Adults: Curricular Strategies for a Multicultural Society*

RP337 *Access to Maths, Science and Technology*

RP357 *Supporting Unemployed Adults in FE*

RP375 *Access to Higher Education for Black Students: A Feasibility Study*

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b) to determine priorities for action to improve the provision of further education and to make recommendations as to how such improvement can be effected;
c) to carry out studies in further education and to support investigations of and experimentation in, and the development of further education curricula and to contribute to and assist in the evaluation of initiatives in further education;
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